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Focus on workforce, ports, state chamber advises

By DAVID DYKES - The Greenville News

A unified workforce development strategy - including a proposed Cabinet-level agency to coordinate the effort - and a viable port operation are two critical economic development tools to bring more jobs to the state, business leaders said Tuesday.

More than \$800 million annually for workforce development and training flows into several South Carolina agencies, yet the result is fragmentation of services that makes it difficult for job-seekers and employers to get the coordinated help they need, the business leaders said.

They believe that to better align the state's work force strategy, a single Cabinet agency with a "workforce czar" should be created to coordinate efforts involving unemployment insurance, job placement, job training and temporary assistance for needy families.

They said other states with a unified strategy are helping more people more quickly and cost-effectively than South Carolina -at a time when the state's unemployment rate has risen to double-digit levels.

In a meeting with editors and reporters from The Greenville News, officials from the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce said, however, their goals for the new legislative year aren't limited to work force development.

"There's also the issue of education in our state to prepare the work force of the future," said Dick Wilkerson, chairman and president of Michelin North America.

Chamber officials said there has been discussion about re-directing some state lottery money to benefit education from kindergarten through the 12th grade, but no plan has emerged.

Employers such as Michelin, Duke Energy and the Greenville Hospital System - "companies that tend to feed at the top of the food chain" - don't have an issue with workforce development in South Carolina, Wilkerson said.

"It's the mid-range companies, and the companies that are starting up, that have a real issue with are people prepared," he said. "And if you're going to start a large company, is there enough skilled workforce to support that?"

"That's the 'now' issue," Wilkerson said. "What we need to do is really look at how we develop people and how we retrain people moving from one industry to the other."

Longer-term, state officials must focus on improving K-12 education, he said.

Through its Michelin Challenge Education program, Michelin employees will volunteer in elementary schools, serving as mentors, tutors and volunteers to provide support to teachers.

The state's port, Wilkerson said, is a "major, major engine" for economic development and a critical underpinning to South Carolina's business health.

The port's position as a deep-draft operation gives it a competitive advantage with shippers who use larger vessels and will go through an expanded Panama Canal, Wilkerson said.

Michelin is a major user of the port in Charleston.

With supplies from Asia having to go to the West Coast and then be transported across the U.S., it becomes "much more economical to ship directly from Asia to the East Coast and after you cross the Panama Canal, one of the first places to stop with a deep-draft port is Charleston," Wilkerson said.

State chamber officials stressed that as part of workforce development that the structure of the Employment Security Commission must be changed to ensure taxes businesses paid into the system are used responsibly.

Over the past decade, South Carolina's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund has been in steady decline, the officials said. They said a restructuring of unemployment benefits would bring more accountability of who receives benefits, a better matching of people and jobs and stronger management of the overall fund.

The new workforce agency would take funds from the ESC, departments of Commerce, Education and Social Services, technical colleges and others to coordinate short-term job development activities "where it's so fragmented now," said Otis Rawl, the state chamber's president and chief executive officer.

"If you go to an ESC office right now, depending on which state agency you're dealing with, you'll have to go to a different (computer) terminal to be able find out the information that you need just to be able to apply for a job, find out where a job is, the type of training you need, the type of qualification," Rawl said. "All that ought to be interactive and you ought to be able to go to one location, one place, to be able to access that information."